Indiana State Department of Health
Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Exposure to Bloodborne Pathogens

What are bloodborne pathogens?

Bloodborne pathogens are germs that are present in human blood and body fluids which can infect and cause disease in humans. The bloodborne pathogens of primary concern are hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Who is at risk for exposure?

Everyone could possibly be exposed to bloodborne pathogens. The most common ways bloodborne pathogens spread are through sexual contact or IV drug use. However, any contact with infected blood or body fluids carries the risk of possible infection. Injuries from being stuck by needles or cut by sharp instruments are the most common reason for exposure for health care workers.

The issues to consider when trying to determine the level of risk of becoming infected with a bloodborne pathogen disease include:

- The exposed blood must be infected with a bloodborne pathogen
- Type of exposure (sexual contact, through cut in the skin, needlestick, etc.)
- Amount of blood involved in the exposure
- Amount of the disease in the blood at the time of exposure
- The person must be susceptible to the disease
- Open sores or areas of your skin with rash

How are bloodborne pathogens spread?

Coming in contact with a bloodborne pathogen may occur in many ways. Any kind of opening or break in the skin is a place for infected blood or fluids to enter the body. Scrapes, cuts, rashes, burns and other minor injuries that create an opening in the skin are ways for bloodborne pathogens to enter the body. The eyes, nose and mouth are also openings for diseases to enter. Bloodborne pathogens are not spread through skin that is not cut or broken.

How should blood exposures be treated?

Immediately after an exposure to blood:

- Wash the area that has been exposed to blood with soap and water
- If the nose, mouth, or eyes are involved, flush the areas with water or saline
- Do not squeeze or use bleach on the wound
- Contact your doctor for follow up testing and possible treatment

How are exposures prevented?

Staying away from situations that might expose you to a bloodborne pathogen is the best prevention. Avoid direct contact with someone else's blood or other body fluids. Universal Precautions (a method of infection control where all human blood and body fluids are considered and treated as if they are infected with a bloodborne pathogen) should be followed at all times. People in the workplace should follow their employers Exposure Control Plan, which is required to be in place by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and is to be designed to protect employees against exposure to bloodborne pathogens in the workplace.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/bbp/; www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/bbp/universal.html and www.osha.gov/SLTC/bloodbornepathogens/gen_guidance.html

This page was last reviewed May 13, 2013